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Education Committee  
March 15, 2023

HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators.

Good Afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty and members of the Education Committee. My name is Michael Barry and I live in Manchester and I work as the Coordinator for the Connecticut Coalition for Retirement Security. I am also a proud former paraeducator. After finishing a year of service as an Americacorps Vista Volunteer, I was hired to work as a paraeducator at a city school which served teens who had previously dropped out or left to have a baby. It was the Emily Griffith Opportunity School in Denver, Colorado and I still remember it as one of the most memorable experiences of my life. The teachers at EGOS were so overwhelmed by the increased enrollment that year, that another paraeducator and I started our own tutorial program because the kids were so far behind in Math. Many could not learn in a traditional classroom setting and although a tutorial setting is not possible in most schools, we were able to pull it off. It was an amazing experience. At the end of the year when the Principal signed my paperwork rehiring me for the next year, I realized that a life in the classroom was not for me and it made me admire my colleagues even more.

I returned to Connecticut and began working as a Juvenile Probation Officer with the Judicial Branch at a time when there were many, many school based arrests. The state has gone in a much better direction since then, but at the time I was often invited to PPT meetings for my clients and I would attend only as an advocate for my clients and their families. I remember the PPTs where a paraeducator would attend - usually at a follow-up PPT as they were sometimes part of the original IEP, who had worked directly with the child and I always wished they had more of an opportunity to speak in conjunction with the funding stakeholders with the board of education. I was glad to have the opportunity to previously work in their shoes, and they have been a concern of mine, especially after I became President of my Judicial union and joined the executive board of the AFT who represent many paraeducators across Connecticut. With varying degrees (depending on the municipality) of low pay during the year and no pay during the summer, it is not surprising that there are over 1300 unfilled paraeducator positions in Connecticut.

And, lastly, since retiring and now representing the Connecticut Coalition for Retirement Security I believe that all workers in Connecticut have a right to retire with dignity with a defined pension plan and I hope we can add our Paraeducators to the list of important public service jobs who have that right and those benefits.

Thank you for allowing me to testify before you today and I would be happy to answer any questions.